

The voice of children in a community garden

How Kerry Local Creative Youth Partnership involved children in a lunchtime and after school garden project in a primary school

1) Background information

The project on which we involved children in decision-making

The Children's Garden Project was led by Kerry Local Creative Youth Partnership at Kerry Education and Training Board as a lunchtime and after-school project on the grounds of Presentation Primary School Tralee, Castle Street, Tralee. From the outset there was an understanding about the importance of child and youth voice. The school was part of the Creative Schools Programme, so they had a strong interest and understanding of child participation in decision-making. The LCYP Coordinator proposed establishing a small consultation group of children to work with the school and LCYP on the project in addition to all children in the school being involved. The children's consultation group played a particular role in the early stages of the project and continued to be involved throughout. The LCYP Coordinator contracted a Creative Facilitator with design, construction, and woodworking skills to work with children in an after-school group and at lunchtimes with children in the school.

The topic on which we wanted children's views

Their creative ideas for the design of a children's garden.

The reason we wanted their views

As a lunchtime and after-school project, it was essential that the children's ideas were integrated into the design and planning and development of the garden.

The decision-makers that facilitated and listened to their views

The Creative Youth Co-Ordinator of Kerry Local Creative Youth Partnership at Kerry ETB facilitated the initial consultation with the children's consultation group. Ongoing facilitation with all children in the school was led by the professional creative facilitator, Donnchadha O'Connor, who was assigned to the project, with support from class teachers and from the School Principal, John Hickey. The Creative Youth Co-Ordinator of Kerry Local Creative Youth Partnership wrote a report of the initial consultation with the children's consultation group and contracted the Creative Facilitator to use the findings from the report and work directly with the children in the school on the project.



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The age profile of the children

The children's consultation group was comprised of six second class students, aged 8. COVID-19 Protocols and guidance prevented the merging of ages and classes. All children in the school were involved in the development of the garden.

Other relevant information about the children (e.g. disability, ethnic background, social disadvantage, etc.)

The six children in the consultation group included an ethnic, ability and confidence mix. They were representative of a typical class in the school.

2) How we gave children space, voice, audience and influence

SPACE: How we listened to children in a safe, inclusive space

Things we considered	What we did
The space or setting where we got their views	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• We considered ensuring the right space for the initial consultation the six children in the consultation group. We chose to arrange the meeting in the actual garden, as we needed to be in the space to discuss how it might be best designed.• The Creative Facilitator chose a time that there would be peace and time to reflect, uninterrupted by noise and other students on the move. Wooden log stools were laid out in the round, in the garden setting so that we could all be together, COVID safe and in the outdoors. We worked at the same height, the facilitator also sitting on a low stool in the midst of the group. The children found this exciting, we ensured it did not 'feel' like a classroom setting.• Each participant had a clipboard and pencil...this made everyone feel equally important. The tone was one of fun but with a purpose, their enthusiasm was evident from the outset.
How we identified the children to be involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The school identified a group that would be representative of a typical classroom makeup, different cultures, different abilities, different backgrounds. This was deliberate so that we could maintain an inclusivity in our approach to the consultation.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The consultation group played a central role in the project, but all children in the school had the opportunity to contribute to suggestions for the garden project.
How we involved those who were directly affected by the topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project was focussed on including all students in the school in the design of a garden. The Creative Facilitator worked with children during school lunchtimes and in after-school club sessions. COVID-19 guidelines were in place, so all workshops took place outside in tolerable weathers. It became a whole school community initiative with every class taking part.
How early in the process they were involved in decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The children in the school had frequently and repeatedly asked for a garden in the school. The children's consultation group were consulted at the outset on this idea. They worked with the Principal to pick the best location for a garden. The initial consultation provided the key ingredients that helped towards building a workplan for the project. The project was a learning opportunity about design and planting and a multi-functional creative, garden space evolved that can be used during school, after-school, by parents and babies out for walks and school drop-off, and for events and planting projects.
How the process was inclusive and accessible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The initial consultation and the entire project took place in a space that is fully accessible. All views were welcomed and children from every class in the school took part.
How we made sure they felt safe to express their views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The space was made safe and private, and the Creative Facilitator briefed the children's consultation group about the fact that the Creative Youth Co-Ordinator would visit the school and asked if they would like to take part in a consultation session. The Co-Ordinator ensured that the participants knew why they were being consulted and what would be done with their views and opinions. An icebreaker that was fun was

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	used to build trust and a sense of togetherness in the group, so that everyone felt safe.
How we continued to involve them throughout the decision-making process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The children's remained involved throughout the decision-making process. When participants experienced challenges and problems, they were resolved through discussion, and the children were great problem-solvers, as the project rolled out.

VOICE: How we gave children a voice in decision-making

Things we considered	What we did
How we informed children about the topics on which we wanted their views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Creative Facilitator provided age-appropriate explanations about garden design, and children were asked how they felt about taking part in a consultation. Language and hard words were adapted where they needed to be. We were keen to ensure everyone felt included. These discussions included questions about what children do in gardens and how they see gardens.
How we made sure they knew their views would be taken seriously	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The children were told that their views would be valued and taken seriously by the school and the Creative Youth Co-Ordinator. We introduced a process for gathering views which included notetaking, drawings and photography. These aspects added a seriousness to the recording of the consultation.
How we informed them about level of influence they could have on decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We informed the children what would happen to their ideas, asking them to think through the more hard-to-realise views, especially where the design budget had limitations. We were careful not to promise something that could not be achieved. It was important to strike a balance between imagination, break-through ideas and the realities of cost. We knew one suggestion, a request to include a zip line, that it would be impossible to include, the group rallied around the child who suggested it, saying they could all do that activity in their local park.

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<p>The methods we used to get their views</p>	<p>The focus of the consultation with the children’s consultation group was to seek children’s blue-sky ideas for a children’s garden which would be a space where after-school projects could happen, where day lessons could be delivered, but essentially a creative design project for children to enjoy. A consultation methodology was developed as follows which included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An Introduction • An Icebreaker • Seeking the children’s views on two topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The creative things they liked making or doing ○ The creative things should be in the garden • Small group work where ideas were considered in pairs. • Larger group work where we looked and decided on common ideas and key ideas. Time was allowed so that the children could look at the actual garden ensuring topics such as safety, things to do, what we can see, what could we make etc., these were all easily understood questions and topics of interest that came about very naturally in the session. • We used included notetaking, drawings and photography in gathering their views. • Finally, we gave the children information about the next steps in the project. <p>In addition to the initial consultation with the children’s consultation group, children from all classes in the school were regularly brought to the garden space to seek their views on the project as it developed.</p>
<p>How we made sure they could identify topics they wanted to discuss</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The methodology outlined above ensured that children had multiple opportunities to identify topics they wanted to discuss.
<p>The topics and issues they raised</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The overwhelming response to the space was that the garden needed to be a place that would make them smile and one in which they could have fun.



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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They knew the difference between a garden and a playground, and they loved the idea of sharing it with others. • They were most keen to see people in the garden, that it would have special features such as furniture. • They were keen to make a giant heart for the garden that would represent the care and love they had for each other in the school. This will be represented in a mural as part of the ongoing project in 2023.
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AUDIENCE: How we made sure that there was an audience (decision-makers) for the children’s views

Things we considered	What we did
How we developed a report or record of the children’s views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A report was written and shared with the school Principal and Creative Facilitator. • A meeting was held with the children’s consultation group to discuss the findings and how ideas would be incorporated and worked through.
How we checked back with them that their views were accurately represented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The children’s consultation group were included in workshops and work on the project continues. • The garden is always being worked on and new views are formed about it every day.
How we involved the decision-makers who are responsible for influencing change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The principal and other decision-makers in the school were involved from the start and at the heart of the planning for the project.
At what point we involved decision makers in the process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From the outset all decision-makers were involved.
How we and other decision-makers showed our commitment to listening to, and acting on children’s views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The principal and other decision-makers ensured that the ideas the children worked on were of their own design. • All planting was done by the children, and they decided how they wanted to decorate the garden, from rock insects, wooden furniture to positivity stones. • As gardens are never finished, they grow and die, the children find uses for the plants they are growing, they



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	<p>think about food and food from different countries that they have planted. As it is a seasonal garden, the children's views are worked on continuously in the project. There is strong sense of sustainability to the project, as it lives on in the daily lives of not only the after-school group, but the core school population also.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was a project to benefit everyone, including parents and caregivers, who also use the garden, especially to entertain younger children.
How we supported children to play a role in communicating their own views to decision-makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children in the school were involved at all stages and frequently communicated their views to the Creative Facilitator, the Principal and the LCYP Coordinator.

INFLUENCE: How we made sure children's views were taken seriously

Things we considered	What we did
How children were given updates at key points in the development of the garden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The children in the school were given regular updates on progress in developing the garden. • They all participated in its development at class level and took on responsibilities as part of class teams, and in groups in the after-school sessions.
How their views were acted on by the appropriate decision-makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Their views were recorded and incorporated into the workplan for the project. • As the project is ongoing, opinions are still being sought from children about next stage solutions.
How we continually checked back with children and young people about the ways you used their views with decision-makers (if possible or appropriate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The children were active participants in the project and had a great sense of inclusion.
How they were given full and age-appropriate feedback explaining how their views were used (or not) and the reasons for decisions taken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Principal and Creative Facilitator kept the group informed and they are aware of any ongoing work continuing in the garden.

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<p>How we enabled them to evaluate the process throughout</p>	<p>The sessions with the children’s consultation group were all evaluated. The initial consultation asked three key questions to inform the feedback:</p> <p>Did you enjoy this activity? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Did you get to share your ideas? Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Maybe <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>How should we change the session to make it better?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These questions were core to all sessions and very important in nurturing and expressing child voice. • Positive feedback was also received about the development of the project, from the children and the school community.
<p>What the children said in the evaluation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All six initial evaluations from the first consultation session were very positive. A 100% rating for the enjoyment of the activity and 100% agreement that they got to share their ideas. • There was no feedback that anything could have been done to make the session better. • Words like ‘perfect;’ and ‘don’t’ were used to answer the question ‘How should we change the session to make it better’.

IMPACT

The changes that were made because of children giving their views

A wide range of garden elements and features were developed, some of which have yet to be finished and installed as the project is ongoing. The children’s consultation group chose the following items to feature in the garden, some of which have already happened and some of which are planned.

Already happened:

- A pink tree, a blue tree and other coloured trees will feature in a proposed mural
- Drawings of were incorporated on Perspex glass
- A tree with a seat has been installed

- Proper seats and proper tables with rainbow colours and other small furniture was made as part of the workshop sessions
- Lots of flowers and colour
- Lots of pinecones were included and painted
- A place for the homework club, which is used all the time
- A little fairy garden and fairy decorations
- A place they can plant things and wear wellingtons
- A table full of flowers
- A little tree with a bench

Will happen in the future:

1. A mural that will feature something that represents pride in their school, a rainbow, a sun, clouds and other ideas
2. A roof will be installed in 2023 so people can come in when it is raining
3. Lights will be incorporated into an awning for the garden that is planned for 2022, so they can use the garden in the evening
4. Something that would allow a swing or something they could climb to look down at the garden is under consideration but has yet been realised
5. Stars in the garden, which will feature in the light for the awning or in the mural
6. A structure that can be climbed but that grows stuff in a vertical way, a tree house was mentioned, which may be part of the next stage

3) The learning for the project and school

The key learning for our project and school from the process and outcome (end result) of involving children in decision-making

One of our key learnings was the fact that consulting with children in a very open way resulted in them displaying highly creative, blue-sky thinking. They saw the voids in the space and not just the ground and the fences, they had clear views about what should overhang, be on top of the garden. The space comprises a stage area, an outdoor class including blackboard and seats, raised beds for growing fruit and vegetables, and a sensory area. Another learning was how happy it made the children to share their views, to be listened to and how passionate they became about the garden project for their afterschool and for school. Their sense of pride in their school and after-school was overwhelming, the project already meant a lot to them. There was such delight to know how capable the children were of taking an idea and going through a design process to get to an eventual outcome. The results were excellent. 'It made us aware that children's voice should, be more affirmed every day in the school and after-school', John Hickey, Principal.



Looking back, how did the final outcome compare with our initial assumptions?

The results excelled all expectations. Initially much thought was given to set structures but through consultation with the children, as users of the space, it became obvious that it needed to be an adaptable space, that can 'house' activity and that it was not just for learning, but also for fun, a place within the grounds of the school, that children could go to.

What worked well?

The setting for workshops, the schedule and the practical involvement of the initial children's consultation group who shared their views. This allowed for a momentum to build and for feedback to be continuous. There was a high ambition within the project that every child in the school would take part. Working through lunchtime and after-school club sessions achieved this and the garden has born two seasons of crops and flowers. Crops will come out every year which is such a positive. Perennials, fruit and herbs for years to come will flourish and the seasonal nature of the garden is of huge interest to the children. They have become more environmentally aware of bees, insects, pollinators and all the elements of garden management because they planted and watched enthusiastically as the garden grew. The inclusion of a small stage area has allowed for performances and recitals, and this had added a very strong element to the garden. As everything is accessible to toddlers and Mum's with babies, the community have enjoyed the garden as a space full of curiosity and changing interest across seasons.

The project is ongoing in the life of the school and some aspects require additional funding which is still under consideration. There is a love for the garden by the children, and it has born, fruit, vegetables, and flowers, and acted as space for drama, music and fun. The children remain involved in the progression of the garden, and it acts as a community space for other schools to use, which has been an added bonus.

If we were doing it again, what we would do differently

I would have liked more time to set up the children's consultation group as an advisory group to work with the school throughout the entire project. I would give more time and consideration to the role of this group, as the nature of the project, while long term and ongoing offers great opportunities for ongoing child and youth voice participation.

